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ABSTRACT

Community-based research in Black Studies is a general phrase suggesting that scholarship about blacks should be pursued within a framework of theory, praxis, and community service. Both theory and praxis are critical in order to understand fully how black life experiences have molded and are reflected in American civilization. Theory refers to the building of predictive and projective knowledge about the experiences of blacks, and praxis implies that theoretical understandings of black life experiences should be informed by the concrete experiences of blacks. Community service refers to the idea that students should use their education, as well as the resources of the institution of higher education, to assist in resolving the economic and social problems and challenges of black individuals and communities. The growth of these ideas is traced in the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and Malcolm X. Two major scholarly works that reflect the synthesis of scholarship, praxis, and community service are Kenneth Clark's "Dark Ghetto" (1965) and "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual" by Harold Cruse, also published in the 1960s. In spite of intellectual and institutional resistance to the synthesis of black scholarship, praxis, and community service, it is imperative that the black community continues to pursue its pedagogical tradition. Black Studies must continue to use the highest standards of intellectual pursuit in ways that connect theory, praxis, and community services. (Contains 20 references.) (SLD)

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Theory, Praxis, and Community Service: Cornerstones of Black Studies

by
James Jennings

OCCASIONAL PAPER

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This paper is based on a presentation made on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary celebration of Cornell University's African Studies and Research Center in March 1990. James Jennings is a professor of political science at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and director of the Trotter Institute.

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One of the most established African-American and African Studies departments in the United States celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 1990. The theme of Cornell University's Africana Studies and Research Center celebration in March 1990 was "Scholarship and Praxis." This was appropriate in that this theme has a long history in black intellectual thought in the United States. A few Black Studies departments and programs across the nation have built curricula on the basis of building theory and knowledge linked to involvement with community-level experiences, and in preparing students to work in a variety of civic and professional settings. While the theoretical literature utilized by some scholars in Black Studies is broad and international, much in this field directly or indirectly responds to diagnosis and analysis of historical and current living conditions of blacks in America.

"Community-based research" in Black Studies is a general phrase suggesting that scholarship about blacks should be pursued within a framework of theory, praxis, *and* community service. Both theory and praxis are critical in order to understand fully how black life experiences have molded and are reflected in American civilization. Theory refers to the building of predictive and projective knowledge about the experiences of blacks in the African diaspora, and how such experiences have molded and impacted on major national and global developments. The term "praxis" implies that theoretical understandings of black life experiences in this society should be informed by the concrete experiences of blacks in the political, economic, educational, and cultural arenas and within the purview of the African diaspora.

Related to this is the proposition that "objectivity" in the field of Black Studies may not be possible if approached solely within highly specialized and discipline-based conceptualizations. For instance, to fully understand and analyze black politics in the current period requires some degree of appreciation and knowledge about the history of the black community in this country, and abroad. One can understand certain kinds of black political developments today in the United States, for example, by reading C.L.R. James's *History of Negro Revolt*, or his classic work, *The Black Jacobins*, that analyzed the San Domingo Revolution under the leadership Toussaint L'ouverture.[1]

The pursuit of objectivity and analysis in Black Studies cannot be time- or place-bound. It has been suggested correctly that much about race relations in America can be learned by studying the struggles of blacks in South Africa, and vice versa. In fact the history of the black struggle for equality and the overthrow of apartheid in South Africa is tied to the black struggle for social justice and the overthrow of Jim Crowism in the United States. But studying the conditions of "free" blacks in America during the colonial period can also be used to understand race relations in the American city of the 1990s. As has been suggested by Derrick Bell, a proper metaphor for summarizing race relations in America across various historical periods is a gyroscope. Actors, conditions, and institutions may change—a tilt of the gyroscope in various directions and angles—but the fundamental relationship and notion of domination of blacks by whites continues through these periods of social and political changes.[2]

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"Community Service" refers to the idea that students should utilize their education, as well as the resources of the institution of higher education, to assist in resolving the economic and social problems and challenges faced by families, neighborhoods, cities, and the general polis.[3]

It should be emphasized that Black Studies has already helped to define a relationship between community service and scholarship. The framework suggested in the scholarship of Black Studies presents an aggressive model for defining and pursuing community service. It includes the following four components:

- institutionalized learning settings in field placements as a major component of undergraduate and graduate education;
- participatory roles for students and faculty in every-day struggles of the community;
- developing ongoing relationships and institutional linkages with community and grassroots organizations; and
- development of research paradigms that make presumptions about the strengths of people of color, rather than utilizing deficit models or pathology as the guide posts for research.

Again, these components are exactly the ones called for by a long line of black intellectual giants in America and abroad.

Community service implies focus on changing and improving living conditions for blacks, and thereby, the broader community. This is an important theme in Black Studies, as stated by Abdul Alkalimat in his Introduction to *Paradigms in Black Studies: Intellectual History, Cultural Meaning and Political Ideology*, "There is one profound consistency in all fundamental modes of black social thought: a focus on

change. The key issue is changing the conditions that cause black people's historical suffering. . . . "[4] Community service does not confine or limit one to a particular occupation or profession. Ideally, it means that individuals educated under the umbrella of Black Studies understand that race is a fundamental reality in American society that has been used to exploit blacks, whites, and other racial/ethnic groups, and that until the black community is able to attain social equality and a certain degree of economic progress, this will continue to be the case in our society.

The suggestion that Black Studies should reflect research concepts and paradigms based partially on community experiences is one of the strongest traditions within the black struggle for educational equality and opportunity in the United States, and abroad. The first editorial of the nation's first black newspaper in 1827, *Freedom's Journal*, for example, called for black leaders to use education as a political resource aimed at the abolition of slavery, and at uplifting the black masses.[5]

This was an important theme of Booker T. Washington's autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, published in 1895.[6] Washington explained that he decided to pursue education in order to return to his community with skills that would help uplift blacks in the South. He argued further that this was a widely held belief in the black community; that is, those blacks fortunate enough to acquire an education were expected to return benefits to less fortunate blacks.

This theme was also reflected in the activism of black journalist and antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells Barnett, who went much further than Booker T. Washington regarding the professional responsibility for "community service" on the

part of the black scholar and activist. While Washington generally felt that black scholarship could be utilized to uplift the race, such uplifting could be carried out under the social and economic order of American society. Barnett, however, believed that the *moral* responsibility of black intellectuals meant not only trying to uplift socially and economically the community, but also challenging a racist social order. According to Barnett, black intellectuals even had moral license to consider those social situations that might require military actions in order to redress wrongs committed against blacks in America.[7]

The proposal that black scholarship must be put at the service of solving the social, economic, and political problems of the community was certainly a strong theme in the life of W. E. B. Du Bois. This intellectual giant dedicated his life to the belief that knowledge and intellect should be informed by praxis, and also be at the service of the black community. Indeed, Du Bois's often misunderstood idea of the "talented tenth" was based on this very proposition.

Du Bois certainly did not advocate that a black elite be established as in a neo-colonial bourgeoisie that would serve as a bridge or channel between powerful colonial powers and "the natives." Du Bois acknowledged that because of racism in America society, it would be unlikely that the masses of blacks would be educated and thereby equipped to challenge the racial, economic and political order. What he argued was that those few blacks fortunate enough to break through the barriers of race had a professional—and moral—obligation to help other blacks break down the barriers of racial exclusion in ways that would change society for the better in terms

of social and economic equality.

The meaning of the "talented tenth" in relation to Black Studies was captured by Ron Karenga when he wrote in his *Introduction to Black Studies:*

> Black Studies advocates stressed the need for black intellectuals who were conscious, capable and committed to Black liberation and a higher level of human life. They argued like Du Bois that the race would be elevated by its best minds, a "Talented Tenth" which did not sell itself for money and machines, but recognized and responded creatively to the fact of the indivisibility of black freedom and their indispensable role in achieving it.[8]

The above sentiment reflects some of Du Bois's thinking about this topic. One of Du Bois's major intellectual work, and a critical study in defining the field of urban sociology today, is *The Philadelphia Negro.*[9] This work reflected a deep commitment to the pursuit of scholarship within a framework of praxis and community service.

Decades later, Malcolm X argued eloquently that the purpose of education was to liberate the black mind from mental slavery, but such education had to be grounded in the political and economic struggles to strengthen black communities. Although this theme was one of Malcolm X's important ones, at least two of his many articles and speeches especially reflect this idea. One was a speech he delivered titled, "On Afro-American History."[10] Another document that can be referred to regarding this theme in Malcolm X's thinking and activism is found in the "Principles of the Organization of Afro-American Unity."[11]

Between the turn of the twentieth century and the period of Malcolm X, there were many educators, activists, and scholars who insisted that scholarship that would be useful to the advancement of blacks in the United States must be grounded in

praxis and community service. This is reflected in the works of St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, Oliver Cox, John Henrik Clarke, and others. The proposal that community based research paradigms should be an important component of black scholarship was not limited to African-Americans. Blacks across the African diaspora insisted on this relationship; such scholars included C.L.R. James, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, Julius Nyerere, and many others.

Planning, establishing, and institutionalizing opportunities to pursue scholarship, praxis, and community service within an integrated framework was a major demand of students during the 1960s black cultural renaissance that was reflected partially in the Black Studies Movement in American higher education. This reawakening of the cultural strengths of the black community in America also emerged in the streets of urban America. In many cities where blacks represented a significant number of persons in the total population a range of educational and cultural efforts and institutions were started to pursue programs of cultural expression and education. These efforts were invariably rationalized as a way to improve living conditions for blacks in this society.

In predominantly white universities the call for opportunities to pursue community based research within programs of Afro-American Studies in the 1960s can be summarized with the famous demands of black students at San Francisco State University. Black students, but other students as well, argued that the scholarship they are exposed to should be both informed by the every-day struggles of black people for justice and economic survival, and useful for preparing students

to make contributions to these same struggles.

Discussing the pedagogy of Black Studies, Karenga explains that this was a major and "early objective" of the advocates of Black Studies: "the cultivation, maintenance and continuous expansion of a mutually beneficial relationship between the campus and the community. . . . The intent here was to serve and elevate the life-conditions and the consciousness of the community and reinforce the student's relationship with the community through service and interaction."[12] And in *Introduction to Afro-American Studies,* Alkalimat writes that "Afro-American Studies, as a field, is a partisan activity, an enterprise in which the objective is not merely to understand the world but also to help make it better."[13]

There are at least two major scholarly and classic works on black life in America in the 1960s that reflect the synthesis of scholarship, praxis, and community service. One is Kenneth Clark's *Dark Ghetto,* published in 1965.[14] This important study laid the intellectual and conceptual foundation for numerous studies and books focusing on race relations and the nation's political economy today. The methodology used by Clark to produce *Dark Ghetto* has become quite popular with many social scientists. Clark, however, probably would not have been able to produce this important work if he had sought to study black youth absent his community based work and experiences through the HARYOU program.

The influence and impact of this book was not only on intellectual thought and the development of community action models, however.It should be added, parenthetically, that this book even made it possible for many black and Latino

students to complete doctoral dissertations at the most prestigious universities. Clark utilized an ethnographic methodology that is very effective in studying and analyzing race and community in the United States. Despite continuing resistance to this kind of methodology in some graduate schools, black students investigating matters of race have been able to use Clark's study as an important reference guide in their own studies. (I have supervised several doctoral dissertations, for example, that would have been resisted and frowned upon by "traditional" academics, except that they have been gently reminded of how Clark, an intellectual giant in American scholarship, utilized the same methodology to produce one of the most important books in the social sciences in the 1960s.)

Perhaps one of the most eloquent (and strident) arguments for the pursuit of community based research within Black Studies is presented by Harold Cruse in his work, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual,* published during the same period Clark published *Dark Ghetto.*[15] Cruse reminded us, of what Alexis de Tocqueville, David Truman, Robert Dahl, and many other white scholars had already concluded: and that is, that the "group" is a fundamental social and cultural reality in American society. Cruse simply reminded one that blacks had better understand the meaning of this racial fact. Blacks who are alienated, or disconnected, from their community may, in fact, be ahistorical beings. Individuals, as such, have very little opportunity to do anything that will move the community forward economically and politically. The black community would not move forward, according to Cruse, so long as blacks behaved as a bunch of individuals rather than a cultural group, as have others who

realized economic and political progress in the United States.

The importance of linking Black Studies and a community-based research agenda was reiterated at the 1990 Annual Meeting of the National Congress of Black Faculty. According to the Minutes and Resolutions of the November 2, 1990 meeting of the Council of Community Relations this topic is important for several reasons:

> 1) the presence of black educators in American higher education is intricately and historically tied to black community activism; and
>
> 2) the synthesis of the community's political, social and educational agendas with the research agendas of black researchers and teachers in academe can produce creative, significant, distinctive research projects beneficial to American society.

The keynote speaker for the Annual Meeting of the National Congress of Black Faculty in 1990, renowned sociologist James Blackwell, emphasized this theme in his discussion on mentoring in the black intellectual community.

The many calls for the development of a political and economic Black Agenda also reflects the importance of tying scholarship and teaching about blacks to a knowledge based on community experiences and activism. The 1960s reflected an American society that was morally and politically challenged by the black community, a proliferation of meetings and conventions focusing on what should be included in a "Black Agenda." These gatherings occurred nationally and in almost every location where a significant number of African Americans lived. There has been a revival of Black Agenda conventions in various cities, including St. Louis, Atlanta, New York, Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, and Boston. A national Black Agenda summit was

called and held in New Orleans in April 1989.

The Black Agenda Project and its recent conventions in Boston, co-sponsored by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, is a continuation of these national and historical efforts. The purpose of Boston's Black Agenda Project was to build a strategy that can uplift and empower African-Americans as well as impact the larger society.

The group of black activists, business leaders, civic and governmental officials and educators who met in the early part of 1988 to plan the first Black Agenda Project and Convention activities believed that a black policy agenda for Boston could be utilized in the following ways:

> 1) provide a platform representing the policy principles, values, and views of blacks engaged in attempting to resolve social, economic and educational problems facing the black community;
>
> 2) explore what kinds of public policies and action recommendations might be effective in responding to some of the educational, social and economic problems in the black community, and how such public policies could be effectively implemented;
>
> 3) utilize the Proceedings of the Black Agenda Conventions to document how to hold accountable elected officials and governmental officials regarding the kinds of policies and action recommendations which are, or are not, adopted and how such policies impact on the well-being of black communities;
>
> 4) develop effective political strategies which would represent broad sectors in the black community; and,
>
> 5) declare to the corporate sector, as well as to the media, academic, religious and human service sectors, that the black community must be an integral part of the making and implementing of public policies which impact on the well-being of blacks.[16]

These kinds of objectives could not be fully achieved, however, without the kind of research framework that has been advocated for decades by many Black Studies scholars. Dr. Hubie Jones, dean of the School of Social Work at Boston University and one of the founders of the Black Agenda Project in this city, proposed that a Black Agenda could not move forward if not tied to black intellectuals and researchers who were committed to and actively involved in advancing the political, economic, and cultural interests of the black community.

Although many educators associated with African American Studies have long acknowledged that scholarship must be integrated with praxis and community service in order to understand the black experience in America, this suggestion is still fiercely resisted in many sectors of higher education. Still too many educators choose to approach Black Studies on their campus as a segregated afterthought. Even faculty and administrators at liberal arts colleges and universities may consider Black Studies only as a way of keeping the handful of black faculty and students pacified, rather than seizing the intellectual models that have been produced by Black Studies to challenge a stagnating faculty, or to enhance the quality and excellence of the institution's education.

And while other white educators seem to have finally "come around" regarding the significance of public and community service as an important component of a quality higher education, they seem to be ignorant, or perhaps just forgot, that it was Black Studies that initially forced higher education to consider the importance of linking theory and praxis through public and community service. Seldom, for

example, do the leaders and spokespersons of various efforts to enhance the idea and practice of community and public service at a few universities even mention how Black Studies challenged predominantly white institutions to do this exactly. There are several efforts along this line at major universities that have not made significant attempts to develop communication or linkage with Black Studies departments and programs on their campuses. In some cases, these same spokespersons have overlooked too casually a two- or three-decade history of leadership and struggle on the part of Black Studies faculty and administrators pushing the idea of public and community service on their campus.

The tradition of integrating scholarship with praxis and community service may be in some conflict with two themes in American intellectual and pedagogical thought. These other themes may be viewed as contradictory to the idea of linking praxis, theory, and community service. One theme is that the pursuit of knowledge should not be based on value judgments. And the second theme is that it is unethical for a professor to impose his or her views on a captive audience. This certainly has validity. But, in fact, these principles are not violated by a call for greater integration between theory, praxis, and community service. This call does not mean that politics, or political opinions take the place of scholarship. It simply means that theory is most effective, logical, and useful when it is informed by the real-life experiences of people. In fact, theory that is not informed of such experiences may not be useful for moving the black community forward socially, economically, and culturally.

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Despite the various forms of intellectual and institutional resistance to the synthesis of black scholarship, praxis, and community service that has been posed by American higher education, it is critical that the black community continue to pursue its pedagogical tradition. There are several major challenges facing the black intellectual community that can only be understood and overcome through an intellectual and pedagogical paradigm reflecting theory, praxis, and community service. These challenges cannot be fully studied, analyzed, and certainly not appreciated in terms of their implications for society, within a setting devoid of praxis and community service. And if these challenges cannot be analyzed accurately, then certainly they cannot be resolved. Only a scholarship informed with praxis and in the pursuit of community service can provide enlightenment regarding the resolution of these challenges.

One challenge is the continuing reality of racial hierarchy in American society. Despite the fact that some individuals in the black community have and are realizing social and economic success in this country, the vast majority of blacks are not. Living conditions for those blacks who can be classified as poor, or working class, are worsening in comparison to earlier periods. While other racial and ethnic groups may also be experiencing some social and economic slippage, it is generally accepted as fact that blacks suffer in this way to a far larger extent than whites.

Another challenge facing the black intellectual community is the need to acknowledge and analyze the broadening of the black community's ideological spectrum. Too many pursue scholarship, policy debates, and discussions as if most

blacks truly accepted the notion of assimilation in the United States via integration. As a matter of fact, there are increasing examples of more and more blacks stating—in their own way—that they may not want to be part of American society as it is now constituted. The popularity of Minister Louis Farrakhan, more and more talk of an independent political party, the growing alienation of the so-called black "underclass"—these may be political and social signals that some sectors in the black community are beginning to reject assimilationism, or even perhaps integration.[17]

If this is true, then the black intellectual community has a responsibility to analyze and understand this situation. Only a research and pedagogical paradigm incorporating praxis, theory, and community service can facilitate the needed analysis.

It is suggested in this brief essay on community based research in Black Studies that this represents an important intellectual tradition. Pursuing Black Studies with appreciation of the necessary linkage between theory and praxis based on the community-level experiences of blacks is especially important in the current period. Exposing students to a pedagogy that allows them to appreciate and utilize both theory and praxis will prepare them not only for the professional world, but also to survive more effectively in higher education. Such exposure is a key element in developing the critical thinking skills and analytical capabilities of the students.

Very few traditional departments in academe have been organized around the connection between theory, praxis, and community service. This has been a major reason for the stagnation facing traditionally organized disciplines regarding

understanding of the nature of social and economic problems facing American society. For example, in a recent book, *Theoretical Issues Facing Public Policy Analysis,* William Hawkesworth contends that the field of public policy is in a state of crisis because its methodology and purpose has become obfuscated with a false scientism that serves no useful social purpose in advancing democracy.[18] Scholarship focusing on the economics of poverty, or race relations in the United States, for the most part, have not been able to help develop public policy that can allow the United States as a society to overcome these problems.

Again, Black Studies has developed important models for examining how theory, praxis, and community service might be integrated; this represents an important contribution to scholarship in this society as has been pointed out by Karenga:

> It is not an exaggeration to say that black and other Ethnic Studies are the most trenchant criticism and most definitive mirror of American society. If it is true that one does not evaluate a society by its public pronouncements but by its social practice, then the study of the black experience in the U.S. would obviously give an incisive look at American life, from both a race and class perspective.[19]

This theme reiterates that of Herbert Aptheker in his work, *Afro-American History in the Modern Era.*[20] Here, Aptheker argues that nothing about the American experience can be fully understood without an awareness of the critical nature of the black experience in this society.

I will end this essay by repeating the arguments of both Karenga and Aptheker, and stating that Black Studies is a critical field for understanding the

nature and development of American society, and in instilling in students the ability to think analytically about their society. Black Studies must continue its tradition of using the highest standards of intellectual pursuit, in various ways that connect theory, praxis, and community service. This represents not only an important intellectual contribution—even if it is scoffed at by some scholars—but an important contribution toward democracy in America.

Notes

1. C. L. R James, *A History of Negro Revolt* (Britain: Race Today Publications, 1985; 1938); and, *Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1963; 1938).

2. Derrick Bell "The Gyroscopic Effect in American Racial Reform: The Law and Race from 1940 to 1986" Paper, National Academy of Science: Commission on the Status of Blacks in America (1987)

3. For a fuller statement on my definition of community service in higher education see, "Meeting the Challenges of Higher Education: The Role of Community Service" Paper (1985)

4. *Paradigms In Black Studies: Intellectual History, Cultural Meaning and Political Ideology* (Twenty-first Century Books and Publications: Chicago, 1990), 15.

5. *Freedom's Journal* (Samuel Cornish and John Russworm: New York City, 1827).

6. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*.

7. John Hope Franklin and August Meier, *Black Leaders in the Twentieth Century* [essay on Wells-Barnett].

8. Ron Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (1982), 27.

9. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (Schoken Books: New York, 1967; 1897).

10. Malcolm X, "On Afro-American History" Speech, January 24, 1965 in *On Afro-American History* (Pathfinder Press: New York, 1967).

11. Malcolm X, "Principles of the Organization of Afro- American Unity" in11.22

12. Karenga, op. cit., p.27.

13. Abdul Alkalimat, *An Introduction to Afro-American Studies,* (Twenty-first Century Books and Publications: Chicago, 1973; 1986), 345.

14. Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (Harper and Row: New York, 1965).

15. Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (William Morrow and Co.: New York, 1967).

16. See Boston *Black Agenda Convention Proceedings* 1989, and 1990. Published by the William Monroe Trotter Institute, University of Massachusetts at Boston.

17. See James Jennings, *The Politics of Black Empowerment: Transformation of Black Urban Activism* (Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1992).

18. William Hawkesworth, *Challenges Facing the Theoretical Analysis of Public Policy* (State University of New York Press: Albany, N.Y., 1990).

19. Karenga, op. cit., p.29.

20. Herbert Aptheker, *Afro-American History: The Modern Era* (Citadel Press: Secaucus, N.J., 1971).

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